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AUTHOR	Snidow, Puck; Flanagan, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach was evaluated in a suburban high school social studies class that integrated the county's prescribed social studies and English curricula for honors and advanced placement. Focal points for the two teachers were cohesiveness, cooperation, conducive environment, and concept improvement. The class of 23 students contained 13 students representing a variety of actual or potential problems. Data came from student journals and grades for the interdisciplinary class and a comparison group of government and English students at another high school. Many differences were apparent for the two teachers, whose classroom styles were quite different. Instead of concentrating on traditional learning mode and teacher/student interaction, they concentrated on student success as defined by the teacher and teacher success as defined by the student. Cooperative learning was a necessary tool in the interdisciplinary environment. Students who were given a more global education through the interdisciplinary class appeared more confident in accepting leadership roles and personal responsibility. Student grades were also higher than those from comparison students in traditional classes, and student attitudes became more positive as the year went on. Journal writing proved to be a useful tool for evaluation and student learning. (SLD)

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Research Brief #24

MERC

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ED 411 355

THE SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY CLASS MUST SECEDE FROM THE TRADITIONAL

Why do students act more positively in an interdisciplinary approach to learning? How does the teacher create a successful learning environment in an interdisciplinary class? After attending a seminar in March of 1993 on "Strengthening English and Social Studies Instruction" we came away infused with the speaker's enthusiasm, logic and his apparent successful use of this approach. We zeroed in on and applied many facets of his program in our own classes. After almost two years of involvement in such a class we decided some answers were imperative for the continuation of our program. Our first year saw us constantly concentrating on curriculum concerns. We did not rewrite the curriculum; we integrated the prescribed Social Studies and English requirements for AP/H (Advanced Placement and Honors) students in our county. This year we are focusing on the Four C's: cohesiveness, cooperation, conducive environment and concept improvement, in an effort to achieve academic success. Do each or any of these elements contribute to the success of the program?

PURPOSE

The purpose of our study is to determine if this class is effective and secondly, to identify those elements that may have contributed to this effectiveness.

We have agreed to define "success" (student) and "effective" (teacher) in the following manner:

Success for students: improvement of grades when comparing first and second quarters of the 1994-1995 school year.

Our belief that effective instruction produces an environment that generates successful students leads us to define "effective" (teacher) as to the students' perceptions of the degree to which the following exist in the classroom:

Success for teachers:
- cohesiveness
- cooperation
- conducive environment
- concept improvement

These definitions are based upon oral feedback voluntarily generated by last year's students and the scores from their Advanced Placement Exams taken in May of 1994. These seniors were in the AP/H programs and were coming to us after eleven years of the time honored, traditional, standard educational fare. They were uncomfortable in this new environment where they were expected to assume greater responsibility for their own learning while employing more advanced critical thinking skills.

Initial resistance to the program was very much in evidence prior to the annual "Back to School Night" which was later than usual that year. Parental concerns stemmed from what was construed as an increased workload, more demanding involvement and the lack of a basis for comparison. These questions were addressed at the "Back to School Night" and led to numerous expressions of support during the year.

Sam, Sue and Bob were three students whose oral feedback we welcomed because of the diversity in their backgrounds.

Sam's college required that he enroll in summer school as a form of orientation prior to his first semester. He was one of two freshman students to receive an "A" in an English class where the professor had stated that "Freshmen neither receive nor deserve "A's" in this class." Sam stated that the interdisciplinary class allowed him to develop greater confidence in his academic abilities. Sue found herself "way ahead of the learning game" when comparing her preparation and perceptions to those of her freshman peers. She was an indigent who credits the interdisciplinary class with her acceleration in college as a result of her AP scores and her scholarship grants. Bob would have been academically successful because of his motivation and determination. His social skills and peer interaction were almost negligible. By the end of the school year he was no longer shunned by his peers and found himself willingly participating in senior activities to the point of helping with the valedictory. It must be noted here that we were never able to convince two of the sixty students involved in the class that the program would be of benefit to them.

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BACKGROUND OF CURRENT STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

The current interdisciplinary class consists of twenty-three students who range in abilities from Honors to Below Average (based on T.A.P. test scores). Of these twenty-three we have identified thirteen who represent a variety of actual or potential problems. These situations run the gamut; a former Juvenile Detention Center inmate, members of dysfunctional families, self-supporting teens, and teens with obsessive compulsive disorders. The remainder of the class constitutes part of the standard mix inherent in a suburban high school; college bound motivated students, some of whom are also successful athletes.

When we considered the teaming of instructors we were obliged to admit to some initial misgivings. Traditionally, one expects effective teams to comprise of individuals with similar personalities, philosophies and educational experiences. The only commonalties we could find in each other were the facts that we taught at the same school and co-sponsored the Senior Class. However, our respective assistant principals saw these two factors as sufficient to merit our taking a risk and putting a class together.

The countless hours of planning that followed actually found us enjoying our disagreements, bouncing ideas back and forth and above all, experiencing the "honest revelations of our ignorance." We learned to trade liberal and conservative hats, broker for equal time and most importantly, relinquish the ownership of those familiarly labeled "It's worked for me all these years, why change it?" units. Our experiences more than prepared us for this year's interdisciplinary class.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURES

The main focus of our research revolved around journal entries. We maintained individual journals and at periodic intervals we met to share our findings and observations.

Our grade books provided us with a way of charting academic progress and helped us in consulting with other subject area teachers.

Our final source was a member of special services at our school. Her insight and background information proved valuable because it helped ensure a more expedient and insightful assessment of students' needs.

Each time we shared our journal observations we attempted to find common strands. At first we believed we had to force commonalities but the time finally came when we actually could see similarities in our observations. We did not confer prior to class to decide what should be observed. This led to some interesting discussions when we met to share entries. On November 16, 1994, one of us wrote, "We balanced the class today," while the other wrote, "We need more balance." On March 28, 1995, one of us wrote "Yes, we're finally getting there!" while the other wrote, "This is it, we're on target." To reach this point of agreement, exhibited by our most recent entries, has necessitated a constant willingness to forego or restructure the practices of a teaching lifetime. Constant focusing on the Four C's has ensured our continued awareness of the main purpose of our study.

When the school year began, we explained the concept of the Four C's to the students and our hopes that this concept would provide the environment that generates not only academic success but also promotes personal growth.

Tom wanted academic success on a personal basis while Pam was indifferent to achievement, hampered by absenteeism, tardiness and a failure to make up missing assignments. On the other hand, Jane was so bogged down by personal pressures that she could not function in a group setting. Her extreme self absorption crippled any chances she had for success and she was constantly playing "catch up." These three students, like many of their classmates, were constantly shuffled from one cooperative learning group to another. At the time of this writing we consider them to be examples of successful cooperation. Tom is willing to share his research findings, personal learning styles, and knowledge with Pam. Jane is a strong advocate of team playing and brings in related articles and findings to share with Pam and Tom. Pam is present, on time and looking for help so that she may contribute to her pod's (group) success.

Joe, Larry, Ken and Mike viewed themselves as "odd" and not part of any group. Each of them wanted to work alone claiming, "I do better on my own." When each failed the first quarter (nine weeks), we realized some action had to be taken. We put them together in a pod. Each gradually became aware that his differences made no difference and that the class as a unit accepted his individuality. Currently they refer to themselves as "The Odd Pod"; "odd" being synonymous with "unique". They accept and indeed relish their uniqueness as artists, writers, musicians and dreamers. When we have class discussions they are very vocal in their opinions and are no longer defensive. Their current grades are "C" or better. In this group we see cohesiveness in action. On the "negative" side we have difficulty keeping

them quiet as they constantly want to discuss their opinions and findings.

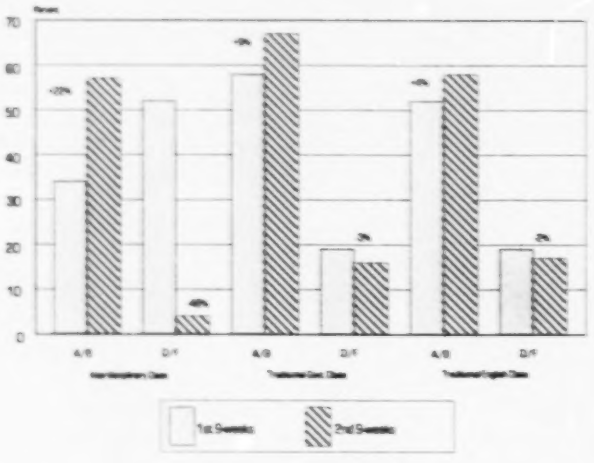
Where establishing a conducive environment was concerned we felt doomed to failure with Ted and Linda. Not only were they new to the County, but they were seniors who had left all their friends behind. They were very opinionated in their criticisms of our school, our system and our culture. Everything was better "at home." Low grades were blamed on "your weird way of doing things here." Parent conferences elicited the same responses but also gave us valuable background information. We explored several options based on this information. One of our first projects was to have each student introduce himself/herself to the class. This gave Linda and Ted the chance to share their culture, i.e. games, hobbies, education, family and future goals. This provided class members with the opportunity to become familiar with each other's diversities and helped promote cultural awareness. Slowly, but surely, Linda and Ted became absorbed into the class and though we still hear the occasional "At home we always . . . ," it is no longer deafening. Ted has found a comfortable niche and is making excellent academic progress. His current grade is "B+." Linda has come around almost 360 degrees. She is enthusiastic, curious and very much the guiding light in many of our discussions. Her current grade is a "B."

Concept improvement was going to be a breeze; positive reinforcement and lavish praise. The cliches fairly oozed from our pores until we met Daisy. Here was the personification of a brick wall. "Don't bother me," "I don't need y'alls help," "So what if I fail?" were her stock-in-trade reactions to our team and individual efforts to develop a rapport with her. Of the four courses she was taking, she was in danger of failing three. Finally, after tolerating the inappropriate language and the belligerence ("So what if I parked in the Principal's parking spot? I have an exam to take and she doesn't") we decided to approach her with the idea that we didn't want her to fail. We promised to tutor her in all her subjects and encouraged her to make the best of her physical as well as intellectual assets. We would love to write that she is a changed person, we cannot. There are still days when one of us has to take her for a calming walk around the building or to the parking lot to check just where she is parked this time. We can, however, report that as of now she is passing all her subjects and even comes in early for help or just to chat.

To get a comparative picture of student performance we looked at end of nine week grades for the first and second grading periods for the students in our interdisciplinary class versus those in traditional senior government and English classes at another High School in our district. (We plan to examine grades from the third nine-week grading period when they become available.)

Student Performance

Comparison of 1st and 2nd 9-Week Grades



As the graph shows the combined percent of A's and B's rose from 35% to 57% (+22%) in the interdisciplinary class while the percent of D's and F's declined from 52% to 4% (-48%). A's and B's combined rose 9% and 4% in government and English respectively, while D's and F's dropped 3% in government and 2% in English.

SO WHAT?
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research has led us to surmise that many factors contribute to academic success and student growth. From a personal perspective we were amazed by the multiplicity of differences existing between the two team members. Our classroom management techniques are still quite individual, though we have learned to "live with" and accept these differences. Rather than subscribing to the traditional learning mode and teacher/student interaction, we concentrated on two factors; student success as defined by the teacher and teacher success as defined by the students. We drew our conclusions from these two components.

Students' differences need to be accepted. Rather than making the effort to change differences it is more advantageous to accept them and create opportunities for them to work positively for the benefit of the entire class.

Cooperative learning is a very necessary tool in the enhancement of the academic environment. Students who are trained to pool their resources, learn from each other, teach each other, and accept a more responsible role in their own and their pods' academic success, are also capable of strides in their personal growth.

Students who are given a more global education through an interdisciplinary class appear more confident to assume leadership roles while also learning that a leader often has to follow.

Teaching teams do not have to consist of clones. Healthy interaction and success can be generated by people who are just as different and individual as the students they teach.

Journal writing is an important tool for teacher teams because it helps generate discussions, jog memories, and clarify perceptions.

Teacher teams need to cede ownership. Change, flexibility, and risk taking are mandatory components of success. Essentially, we must learn to translate individual ownership into dual responsibility.

Puck Snidow
Teacher, Government/History

Margaret Flanagan
Teacher, English

Phone 804 828-0478

FAX 804 828-0479

Internet JPISAPI4@CABELL.VCU.EDU